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How Arafat's Palestinian Authority Became an "Entity Supporting Terrorism"

In the aftermath of the December 1-2 Hamas bombings in Jerusalem and Haifa that left 27 Israeli civilians dead and 175 wounded, the Israeli government designated the Palestinian Authority "an entity that supports terrorism." This determination, even if only declaratory, closed a chapter in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

At the time of the signing of the first Oslo Agreement on September 13, 1993, Israel viewed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a bulwark against the militant fundamentalist challenge of Hamas -- an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Islamic Jihad -- disciples of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. In the 1980s and 1990s a region-wide struggle between the older forces of Arab nationalism and the rising forces of Islamic fundamentalism took place in Algeria, Egypt, and Syria. The PLO was similarly expected to ruthlessly fight Palestinian fundamentalist organizations "without Bagatz and without Betselem" (the Israeli Supreme Court and Israeli human rights organizations).

Indeed, U.S. and Israeli diplomats drew a distinction between their PLO peace partners and the fundamentalist "enemies of peace" whom, it was assumed, were trying to undermine the Palestinian Authority. Yet, while PLO and Hamas were competitors for influence among the Palestinians, their evolving relations appeared to be characterized by increasing **collusion** rather than **confrontation**, as described below:

The PLO Reconciles with Hamas

From the very outset of the Oslo process, the PLO refused to assume the role Israel had assigned it vis-a-vis Hamas and other militant Islamic elements. During 1993 the PLO undertook two negotiating efforts with Hamas: in Khartoum, Sudan, in January and in Gaza during September. A six-point agreement was signed between the military wings of the two movements on April 22, 1994, in the Gaza Strip. A third set of talks was held in Cairo on December 17-21, 1995.

The Palestinian Authority Prefers to Harbor Hamas Rather than Dismantle its Capabilities

In January 1996, it was reported throughout the Israeli press that the Chief of Israeli Military Intelligence, Major-General Moshe Ya'alon, warned the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Yasser Arafat refused to dismantle the military potential of his Islamic opposition: "The organizational infrastructure of Hamas continues to be built, whether with weaponry or the mobilization of activists." Ya'alon then explained Arafat's motivation: "Arafat is preserving this situation for final-status negotiations with Israel." In other words, Arafat judged that he benefited from the Hamas and Islamic Jihad attacks on Israel because they provided him with negotiating leverage. After 58 Israelis were killed in Hamas and Islamic Jihad bombings during February-March 1996, Arafat briefly imprisoned their operatives, but began releasing them toward the end of 1996.

Arafat Gives a "Green Light" to Hamas to Attack Israel

In a series of four meetings during March 9-13, 1997, Arafat met with the leaders of Hamas and other militant groups; these opposition elements walked away from the meetings with the clear impression that they had a "green light" to start terrorist attacks against Israel. Summarizing Israel's reading of the March meetings, Chief of Staff Lt. General Amnon Shahak told Israel Radio on March 23: "Organizations such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad have an understanding from the Palestinian Authority to carry out attacks." Ya'alon concluded a year later: "Sadly, I cannot say that at any point since it entered the territory in May 1994, that the Palestinian Authority acted decisively or in a clear-cut way against the operational capability of Hamas and Islamic Jihad" (*Ma'ariv*, April 16, 1998).

Arafat's Own Security Forces Join Terrorist Attacks Against Israel

Perhaps the most significant military development during the Israeli-Palestinian struggle that began in 2000 was the involvement of forces over which Arafat had direct command in the terrorist violence against Israel. This first occurred in September 1996, when the Palestinian security services suddenly opened fire on Israeli soldiers throughout the

West Bank and Gaza, killing 15 Israeli soldiers, some days after Israel opened a narrow wall at the end of a pre-existing archeological tunnel from the Maccabean period, adjacent to the northwestern corner of the Temple Mount. Arafat's forces fired on Israelis again in May 2000 during the al-Naqba riots. But their participation in terrorism became a regular feature of Arafat's intifada since September 2000:

- **Force 17** -- Yasser Arafat's personal bodyguard became regularly involved in sniping attacks against Israeli civilian traffic along main roads crossing the West Bank. Force 17 was initially responsible for mortar attacks on Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip and on Israeli civilian towns and kibbutzim in the Negev. Force 17 was established during the years of the PLO presence in Lebanon; its name was taken from the last two digits of its Beirut telephone number.
- **Fatah Tanzim Militia** -- Fatah, Yasser Arafat's component of the PLO, became the principal force behind sniping attacks at Israeli civilians living in Hebron and in the southern Jerusalem suburb of Gilo, opposite the Arab town of Beit Jalla. Initially, Fatah and Hamas tried to preserve a division of responsibility in their attacks against Israelis: Fatah killed Israelis beyond the 1967 boundaries in the West Bank and Gaza Strip while Hamas concentrated on pre-1967 Israel. By September 2001, both engaged in terrorism everywhere, **yet at least fifty percent of terrorist attacks against Israelis were conducted by Force-17 or Tanzim, forces directly loyal to Yasser Arafat.**
- **Other Palestinian Authority Security Agencies Take Part in Attacks** -- Rashid Abu Shabak, Deputy to Gaza Preventive Security Chief Muhammad Dahlan, masterminded the bombing of an Israeli school bus in Kfar Darom on November 20, 2000. Colonel Taufiq Tirawi's General Intelligence Apparatus in the West Bank joined in the sniping incidents against Israeli civilian traffic. **Over the weekend of December 7-8, 2001, Israel destroyed an illegal Palestinian mortar factory that was hidden beneath the offices of Gaza Palestinian Police Chief Brig.-General Ghazi Jabali.**
- **Joint Operations between Arafat Forces and Hamas/Islamic Jihad** -- During the intifada, joint multi-organizational units became common: a joint Hamas/Force-17 unit in Ramallah was formed in March 2001 that planned bomb attacks in northern Jerusalem, while a joint Islamic Jihad/Fatah unit from the Jenin area attacked Israeli civilians in Afula in late November 2001. At the end of June 2001, a spokesman for the "Popular Resistance Committees" of the Fatah organization admitted that there was **operational cooperation** between Fatah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)

(*Sabiron* website, June 30, 2001).

A Broadening International Consortium of Terrorism

- **Force-17/Hizbullah Cooperation** -- In February 2001, Israeli helicopters struck the car of Lt.-Colonel Masoud Iyyad, an officer in Arafat's Force-17, **who also belonged to the Lebanese terrorist organization, Hizbullah.** Iyyad had ordered mortar attacks on Israeli settlements such as Netzarim. The Gaza branch of Hizbullah was called "Bader Forces." Force-17/Hizbullah connections date back to the 1980s in Beirut when Imad Mughniyeh, the head of special overseas operations for Hizbullah, served in Force-17 before joining Hizbullah.
- **Iraqi Involvement and Collaboration** -- Israeli security services revealed on November 25, 2001, that they had uncovered a 15-man Palestinian cell belonging to the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) of Abul Abbas, an Iraqi-based component of the PLO. **The members of the cell had been trained in the *al-Quds* military camp outside of Baghdad by Iraqi officers. The PLF unit worked closely with Iraqi intelligence. Its weaponry was smuggled in the car of a key Palestinian Authority Security Chief, General Abdul Razek Yehiye, who also serves as an aide to Yasser Arafat and has benefited from immunity at Israeli checkpoints due to his VIP pass** (*Ma'ariv*, November 26, 2001). The pro-Iraqi unit, whose members came from Ramallah, had been planning bombing attacks at Ben-Gurion Airport, Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv, and Afula.

Conclusions

Moving Yasser Arafat to arrest, interrogate, and imprison military operatives of Hamas and Islamic Jihad involves overturning many years of close coordination between the Palestinian Authority and the militant Palestinian fundamentalist organizations. **Given the escalating bombing attacks against Israeli cities emanating from the vast terrorist infrastructure that has grown in the areas under Palestinian jurisdiction, Israel has no choice but to strike directly at the network of terrorism operating within the Palestinian Authority - including forces loyal to Yasser Arafat.**

President Bush declared on September 20, 2001, that "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or with

the terrorists." Bush specifically stated that "any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the U.S. as a **hostile regime.**" **Arafat's failure to close down the terrorist organizations that have spread in his domain will require both the U.S. and Israel to follow a very different course of action in dealing with the Palestinian Authority in the months ahead.**

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